

Nadler Moves Historic Civil Rights Bill on Tulsa Riots

Thursday, 11 June 2009

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Congressman Jerrold Nadler (NY-08), chair of the Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, today chaired a Subcommittee markup of H.R. 1843, the John Hope Franklin Tulsa-Greenwood Riot Accountability Act of 2009. This landmark legislation, which comes 88 years after a tragic riot in Tulsa, Oklahoma against local African-Americans, would provide legal grounds for survivors to seek financial redress. The bill was successfully reported out of the Subcommittee.

“The Tulsa Greenwood Riot of 1921 is a terrible stain on our nation's history,” said Nadler. “It is painful to realize that what can only be described as 'ethnic cleansing' took place in our nation, and that it has been virtually wiped from the history books. Americans of all backgrounds should know of this episode and we should all heed the stark lesson on the evils of officially sanctioned hate, racism and moral cowardice. Fortunately, we now have another chance to confront the past.”

The following is the text of Nadler's opening statement, as prepared:

“Today, the Subcommittee meets to consider the John Hope Franklin Tulsa-Greenwood Riot Accountability Act of 2009, introduced by our Distinguished Chairman.

“In 1921, in less than one day, the Greenwood neighborhood, a forty two square block area of Tulsa, Oklahoma, was attacked by a white mob and burned to the ground. Approximately 300 of its residents were killed by the mob. What had been a thriving community was obliterated.

“A Commission established by the State of Oklahoma issued a report in February of 2001, detailing for the first time, the extent of the city and state government's involvement in the riot and the cover-up that followed.

“A civil rights suit based on these newly disclosed facts, seeking compensation for the damages that occurred as a direct result of the government's involvement, was dismissed by a divided Tenth Circuit on the grounds that the suit was time-barred.

“No one was ever convicted for this outrage – the courts were closed to the more than one hundred lawsuits filed by Greenwood residents and property owners against insurance companies seeking payment on their policies. According to the Commission, 'local officials attempted to block the rebuilding of the Greenwood community by amending the Tulsa building code.'

“It is painful to realize that what can only be described as 'ethnic cleansing' took place in our nation, and that it has been virtually wiped from the history books. Thanks to the work of the Commission, we have another chance to confront the past.

“Chairman Conyers introduced this legislation, which I have the privilege of cosponsoring, to address this longstanding injustice. I want to thank him for his efforts to bring this terrible history to the public's attention, and for his leadership in seeking to do a measure of justice.

"This bill would give Greenwood claimants whose cases were found to be time-barred in *Alexander v. State of Oklahoma* five years in which to bring a civil rights action and have their claims decided on the merits. It is remedial legislation which recognizes that the victims were unable to have their claims heard at the time because the courts and the government were hostile to them.

"Nearly 90 years have passed since the Greenwood community was destroyed with the connivance of local officials. No one has been called to account for it. Very few of the survivors remain.

"In the last Congress, we heard from some of the survivors, including John Hope Franklin, one of this nation's outstanding historians. In addition to providing a first-hand account of that day's events, Dr. Franklin was able to provide the insights of a distinguished scholar. Dr. Franklin's contribution to the study of American history was revolutionary. His work began the process of correcting the distortion of our history by including the African-American experience.

"It is unfortunate that Dr. Franklin is no longer with us to see justice done for the remaining Tulsa-Greenwood survivors. But this legislation reflects his many years of work and it is fitting that we pass it and that it bear his name.

"We cannot undo the past, but we can seek to make amends, to take responsibility on behalf of this nation for what happened, and to do what we can for the survivors. For too many, justice delayed has been justice denied. This is a matter that can wait no longer.

"I urge my colleagues to support this bill."